



Active Learning: A day in the life of a preschool class

Children of preschool age are learning to learn – and they are capable of learning a great deal in an environment that helps them make meaningful connections across all the domains of development. As this story illustrates, growth in language and cognitive skills – not to mention the imprinting of a positive attitude toward learning – occurs quite naturally in the context of social, emotional, and physical growth. This is the story of teachers who know how to put it all together.

Sunlight streams into the windows of the preschool classroom as the children begin arriving on a Monday morning. Ms. Rodriguez, the teacher, greets each of them with a warm smile and asks how they spent their weekend. The children hang up their coats and move confidently into the room, and soon it is filled with a pleasant hum of activity.

Ernie, Jose, and Kortnie return to the block center to finish building the airport they started on Friday. Ernie leads the process with valuable information about the recent airplane trip he took with his family. In the dramatic play area, Maria, Tysheem, and Francesca have set the table and are using the new tortilla press to prepare a make-believe taco lunch for their dolls. Donte and Quincy are curled up in the large overstuffed armchair, “reading” a class photo album that documents their recent field trip to the local farmers’ market.

Marcus and Sam don smocks to get ready to paint a picture. Marcus has limited fine-motor skills, so Sam helps him put on a specially designed Velcro mitt that will allow him to successfully manipulate his paintbrush. Ling and Cassie are helping Mr. Smith, the assistant teacher, take care of the class gerbils – putting fresh cedar chips in the cage, filling the water bottle and food dish. When the girls notice that the food container is nearly empty, they rush to the writing center and create a note. It consists of several scribbled lines, which they say is a reminder for Mr. Smith to buy more gerbil food. They each print their initials at the bottom to sign the note.

A few children are working on puzzles and building Lego constructions at tables. Others have noticed the balls of soft clay arranged on a table in the art center, inviting them to roll, pinch, pound, and squeeze.

When someone mentions “wiggly,” the teacher suggests they demonstrate what that means. Some of the children flop on the floor and inch across the carpet; others bend their index fingers and inch them across their arms.

Ms. Rodriguez and Mr. Smith seem to be everywhere in the room, yet they never appear rushed. Ms. Rodriguez sits nearby and watches the block construction for a while, then casually asks a few questions that inspire the children to add a control tower to their airport so the planes won’t “bump into each other.” She comments on the tortillas the children are pretending to make and encourages them to ask Jose what his mother fixes with tortillas at home.

The teacher orders two pretend tacos “to go” and heads on over to the sand table. When the children at the sand table mention they are sifting “flour” for their cakes, she supports their idea, reminding them where the mixing bowls, measuring cups, and spoons are stored on nearby shelves.

Mr. Smith sits with Jeffrey and Salah as they struggle with fitting a puzzle piece into the right spot. Encouraging them not to give up, he models

how to turn a puzzle piece around to make it fit. All of the children constantly hear words of encouragement and praise as they work hard in the centers.

A Surprise Arrival

Just as the morning seems well underway, Katie rolls into the room in her wheelchair and calls out, “Come see what I found in my yard!” She’s holding a jar with holes poked in the lid. Inside, a fuzzy, black and brown striped caterpillar is munching leaves. Everyone gathers round. “It’s a woolly worm,” she informs them.

Ms. Rodriguez places the jar on the science table, with a *Field Guide to Moths and Butterflies* next to it. She tells the children, “Let’s talk some more about this at circle time. I’ll put out the magnifying glasses for those who want to get a better look.”

A little later, she notices several children leafing through the book and counting the little caterpillar’s stripes. Shonda brings over a clipboard and pen and begins to draw it; Marcus and Sam ask Mr. Smith to help them mix paints that match its colors. Katie finds a piece of furry fabric in the dramatic play area. She holds it for Randy, who has limited vision, to stroke. When she tells him it feels just like her caterpillar, he grins.

At group time, the teacher invites Katie to tell them more about her caterpillar, and she shares an interesting bit of information just learned from her grandfather. “My grandpa says you can tell what kind of winter weather we are going to have by the color of the woolly worm’s stripes.” The children who made drawings and paintings of the little creature describe the details they included. As they talk, Ms. Rodriguez makes a list of their observations in English and Spanish: brown (“marron”), black (“negro”), and furry (“peludo”).

When someone mentions “wiggly,” the teacher suggests they demonstrate what that means. Some of the children flop on the floor and inch across the carpet; others bend their index fingers and inch them across their arms. Cayley breaks into song. “The itsy-bitsy woolly worm went up the water spout...” and they all join in, giggling.

The teacher then asks what more they would like to know about woolly worms, and she gets a chorus of questions: “What do they like to eat? Do they need water? Do they need a house to sleep in? Does this one feel lonely with no mom or dad or friends around? What should we name her?”

Ms. Rodriguez lists them all on a chart and as the children get ready to go outdoors, she asks them to think about how they can find the answers.

After the children go home for the day, Ms. Rodriguez and Mr. Smith talk over what had happened that morning and they begin planning ways to build on the children's interest. Mr. Smith prints out an enlarged digital photograph of the woolly worm and displays it on a board in the art area alongside the children's drawings and paintings. Ms. Rodriguez types the children's comments and prints them out in large type to accompany the pictures.

Remembering Katie's observation about the furry fabric, they look through the classroom's collection of recycled material for scraps that might inspire tactile creations. On his way home, Mr. Smith stops at the library to borrow more reference books. Meanwhile, Ms. Rodriguez telephones Katie's grandfather to invite him to the classroom the next day.

Francesca, a quiet child who has not said much all year, arrives the next morning with two additional caterpillars in a jar. She whispers to Mr. Smith that she was worried about Katie's caterpillar being lonely. Several other children bring leaves and twigs collected from their yards, and soon a small group is hard at work assembling a comfortable home for the caterpillar family.

Katie's grandfather, suitably attired in his farmer's overalls, joins the group for circle time and regales them with tales he heard from his own grandfather. The children ask a lot of questions about "the olden days," and again Ms. Rodriguez records them on a chart to be revisited another day. She reminds the children that Mr. Smith will be in the writing center today to help them if they want to send thank-you notes to Katie's grandpa or to the families who helped provide the caterpillars and supplies for their habitat.

Teachable Moments

The two teachers have worked as a team to design a classroom appropriate for the young children who come here each weekday. It is an environment that is nurturing, inviting, and stimulating; one in which children feel welcome and important. The room is arranged so that the children know what to do, where to find the things they need, and how to interact with each other throughout the day.

Activities are planned based on the interests and needs of the children. Learning is fun, engaging, and meaningful, and the curriculum and daily plans are flexible enough to embrace those "teachable moments."

Ms. Rodriguez uses experiences the children have outside the classroom to teach concepts and skills that are necessary for success in school. Her strategy is in alignment with the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which noted in 1997: "If learning is relevant for children they are more likely to persist with a task and to be motivated to learn more." She also recognizes that children need to be active learners. As a result, they are encouraged to move more than sit still, and to talk and ask questions. They are actively engaged in the learning process and are encouraged to make meaningful choices. They have enough uninterrupted time to become involved, investigate, select, and persist at activities – and to work at their own pace.

Both of these teachers are intentional in their interactions with the children. They ask questions to stimulate thinking and learning in each child, and they provide numerous opportunities to develop social skills such as cooperating, helping, negotiating, and talking.

The children use writing for meaningful purposes and "read" books that are relevant to their lives. They are encouraged to express themselves through art and music. They use their knowledge of numbers as they interact with each other and their environment.

In this preschool environment, concepts and skills are integrated throughout the five domains: Approaches to Learning, Emotional and Social Development, Health and Physical Development, Cognitive Development, and Language Development and Communication. The children are actively and happily developing their own approaches to learning, self-concepts, motor skills, and cognitive and language abilities with the guidance and support of two caring and competent adults.